

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Frank Cockshutt, April 18, 1893

Reply #1331 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C., April 18, 1893. Dear Mr. Cockshutt:

Your note of the 11th instant received.

Defective hearing in a little child is too serious a matter to be neglected, as it interferes with the acquisition of speech and with the general progress of education.

Irritability of disposition is a common result of deafness, arising from difficulty in understanding what people mean, and in making one's self understood.

This irritability in children usually disappears after sufficient instruction has been given to enable the child to express his wants, and to enable others to reason with him.

Young deaf children obtain their ideas of right and wrong largely from the conduct and treatment of their friends at home. It is, therefore, very necessary that parents of deaf children should express, by their conduct and actions, disapproval of acts that are wrong and approval of acts that are right. This is the only way in which the child can learn.

Punishments, however, have to be given with great care, and I should doubt the advisability of whipping a child in any case, for you can never be quite sure that the child comprehends the object of the punishment, and physical violence is apt to engender in the mind of the child a strong dislike to the person who inflicts the chastisement. I believe in the principle of "natural punishments" enunciated by Herbert Spencer in his "Principles of Education" as specially applicable to deaf children who are apt to judge of motives by appearances and attribute punishments to the angry feelings of their parents rather than to their own naughty acts.

I think it would be a good plan, as you suggest, to let your little boy attend a kindergarten, but, as his hearing is defective, it would be decidedly advisable, in addition to this, to secure the services of a private teacher accustomed to teach speech to the deaf, who could live in your family for awhile as his governess. Experience shows that this plan has proved best in similar cases.

Should it be impracticable for you to secure such a private teacher at the present time, I would recommend you to send your boy at once to Miss Lillie Eginton Warren, 243 W.21st St., New York City, who makes a specialty of teaching young children who are partially deaf, and who has met with remarkable success. Under ordinary circumstances, I would not think it advisable to send so young a child as yours away from home. Time, however, in his case is of the utmost importance. Neglect now can never be fully remedied at a later period of life.

Yours sincerely, (signed) Alexander Graham Bell To Mr. Frank Cockshutt, Brantford, Ontario, Canada.